

Unmasking the phantom

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ABSTRACT: This article explores an experience of bereavement in adolescence and the use of musical theatre in the grieving process.

KEY WORDS: Theatre, grief, adolescence

Despite having been born and raised in Wales, often referred to as the 'Land of Song' (Ifan, 2018), I have never considered myself to be particularly musical. Nevertheless, I have always enjoyed listening to music and recently came to realise how influential it had been in defining, and indeed redefining, my experiences growing up.

I have particularly fond memories of singing in the back of the car with my sister. Our parents didn't play us your typical childhood classics but instead treated us to an eclectic playlist including songs by all of their favourites: The Four Seasons, Andrea Bocelli, Elvis Presley, the Bee Gees and more. I felt like I was being let in on a secret adult world, with strange but wonderful music that made me feel equally as strange but wonderful.

Whilst I recall all of these memories and the accompanying music with fondness, there was one soundtrack that became an intrinsic part of my childhood and adolescence. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (London Theatre, 2021) was my mum's favourite, and she played its songs repeatedly. The stage production tells the story of a musical genius, hidden beneath the Opera house due to facial disfigurement and social rejection. His only companion is his protégé and obsession, Christine Daaé and, with the reintroduction of Christine's childhood sweetheart, the story quickly turns into one of jealousy.

Although not a tale you would expect to find on most children's bookshelves, the *Phantom of the Opera* came to life, and was accessible to me in childhood, through its music. In fact, for a long time I knew nothing of the story, only what I had understood through the songs, but the tale of the *Phantom* had almost become secondary to the stories my family and I had attached to the soundtrack (DeNora, 2003).

On more than one occasion I remember waking up and hearing the soundtrack played at full volume by my mum, singing as she did household chores. The music followed us outside the house too, again played on family car journeys and most notably when, at 11 years old, I was finally taken to London to see the production. My parents had seen the musical performed in the Westend more times than I, or they, could recall and each time they returned with stories of how impressive it was.

"Masquerade! Take your fill, let the spectacle astound you". – Masquerade, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

I was awestruck. Music that had become so familiar to, and loved by, me was brought to life in spectacular fashion and more than a decade later I can recall it all so vividly. It felt like a truly

defining moment in my life and yet the full extent of meaning was intangible. Perhaps, as Adamson and Holloway (2012) suggest, meaning in music is found in familiarity. We are drawn to music that is predictable and of our culture. Certainly, there was a sense of home and belonging for me in the production. The meaning of the songs had become personalized through their association with the fond and significant events and people in my life (Green, 2005).

"You were once a friend and father / Then my world was shattered". – Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Late 2014, our family was hit with devastating news. My mum had cancer and it was terminal. Our house, once lively with people and of course, music, grew silent as time and my mum's illness progressed. 13 months following the diagnosis my mum succumbed and I was never woken up by the sound of the Phantom of the Opera again. Once more I felt like I had been allowed early access to a world far more mature than I was, but this was one of grief, not music.

"Flowers fade, / The fruits of summer fade, / They have their seasons, so do we". – Think of Me, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Funeral songs

"Wishing you were somehow here again, / Wishing you were somehow near". - Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

For many families, the funeral represents an important stage of the grieving process with services acknowledged as a space where grief can be authentically expressed (Hunter, 2008). More specifically, the music chosen to play at funerals is considered to be one of the most important elements of the occasion, helping families to convey the identity of the deceased (Adamson & Holloway, 2012). When planning my mum's funeral, it seemed obvious that the soundtrack to her favourite musical should play some part in it. It had become so entwined in both her identity and our relationships with her; they were 'our' songs (Baraldi, 2009; Frith, 1987).

We chose two songs from the Phantom of the Opera, 'All I ask of you' and 'Wishing you were somehow here again', both because they were favourites of hers and because they seemed to capture the mood perfectly. It felt odd to hear music that had scored many of my childhood memories now playing at what felt like the end of it. Nevertheless, the familiarity of the songs felt comforting on a day that was so alien and unfathomable.

After the service a friend who had attended to support me spoke of the music. She complimented our choices and suggested that my mum must have had great taste. She did, I thought. I felt reassured that we had been able to convey something of my mum's identity through the music she had loved and that we had shared together.

"Recall those days, / look back on all those times, / think of the things we'll never do". – Think of Me, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Nevertheless, at 17 I felt incredibly isolated in my grief. I struggled not only to make sense of a world that inexplicably moved forward without my mum, but whilst simultaneously trying to piece back together my shattered core assumptions and concept of self (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Though I was grieving for my mum, like many others experiencing grief (Everhart, 2007) I was also grieving a version of myself that would never return. I felt, in many ways, like the Phantom; disfigured by my grief and isolated from normalcy. He had almost become symbolic of the manner in which I masked

my own sense of asymmetry and retreated into a personal darkness that felt too ugly to share with others.

"Masquerade! Hide your face so the world will never find you". Masquerade, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Unmasking the phantom

"All I want is freedom, / a world with no more night". – All I Ask of You, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Initially I could not listen to the songs played at my mum's funeral. The soundtrack no longer merely represented popular media but was now a complex symbol of love and loss. I was fearful of the power I felt it held to draw me back into harsher memories now (O'Callaghan, McDermott, Hudson & Zalcborg, 2013).

Eventually however, in an attempt to feel close to my mum and the memories that I was desperate to keep close to me (Vale-Taylor, 2009), I returned to the soundtrack and found it almost completely changed in my absence. In many ways that seemed glaringly obvious to me now, The Phantom of the Opera was not merely a tale of possessive love but also of a daughter who, like me, was grieving a much-loved parent.

In 'Angel of Music', Christine speaks of her late father's promise to send her an angel who, through music, would serve to guide her. The soundtrack now felt like my own Angel of Music, left behind by my mum to help me grieve for her.

"Father once spoke of an angel / I used to dream he'd appear / Now as I sing, I can sense him/ And I know he's here". – Angel of Music, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Indeed, like grief, music is infinite in its ability to impact individuals and since antiquity, has been recognised as a source of healing and human connection (Horden, 2000). Specifically, music has been recognised as an effective tool for grief reconciliation (Iliya, 2015), particularly successful in work with children and adolescence who can struggle to articulate their experiences of trauma (McFerran, 2011). Even at 17 and supported by a counsellor, I struggled to put words to my experiences and felt gagged by the enormity of my loss.

"You have brought me / to that moment / where words run dry, / to that moment where speech disappears into silence". – The Point of No Return, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

I needed to find an outlet for my grief and music came naturally to offer me an alternative, non-threatening step into finding my voice (McFerran & Hunt, 2008). In spite of my lack of musical aptitude, music became a source of self-directed therapy (Fisher & Gilboa, 2016). Whilst my own words failed to capture the depth of my emotions, the lyrics and melodies I listened to offered an outlet for expression (Hillard, 2015). The familiarity of The Phantom of the Opera soundtrack offered an even greater holding space for my grief (Berger, 2006). Listening to the music that we had shared together as a family, I felt closer to my mum who initially had felt so unreachable after death (DiMaio & Economos, 2017). Equally, the lyrics, imbued with new meaning for me now, offered a vehicle not only for the continuation of our relationship, but its evolution (O'Callaghan, 2013). According to Iliya & Harris (2016), engaging in an 'imaginary' dialogue with the deceased is an effective coping strategy used by the bereaved to move forward in grief and indeed, this was reflective of my experience.

In 'All I ask of you' I not only heard echoes of my childhood memories, nor a tale of love, but comforting words that reassured me that I would emerge from darkness.

"No more talk of darkness, / Forget these wide-eyed fears / I'm here, nothing can harm you". – All I Ask of You, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Similarly, in 'Wishing you were somehow here again' I received validation for all that I had lost but, like Christine, I recognised a need to say goodbye. The process of doing so was made easier by the messages in the songs that allowed me to find meaning in loss.

"Wishing you were somehow here again / Knowing we must say goodbye". – Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again, The Phantom of the Opera (Webber, Hart, Batt & Stilgoe, 1987)

Although music itself holds no intrinsic power nor emotion (Neimeyer, 2006), the manner in which the soundtrack interacted with my memories and emotions facilitated a process of exploration that I could not find or face elsewhere (Duffey, 2005). The resonance I found in particular lyrics helped me to identify unhelpful narratives, whilst others offered alternative perspectives and even hope (Duffey, 2005). It would be untrue to claim that the soundtrack to The Phantom of the Opera musical was the sole contributor to my healing, however, it undoubtedly offered a gateway into further exploration and conflict resolution. In sharing my experiences of finding expression and comfort in music, I hope that others too can consider the potential it may hold for themselves, both personally and in the service of others. In particular, I am keen to highlight that in my experience, this potential was not minimised by my lack of musical aptitude. On the contrary, the subjectivity and fluidity of music offered a safe space that met and shifted to meet my needs in different seasons of my life.

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